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## “IS DIPLOMACY DEAD?”

Diplomacy does have its ups and downs. Despite the headlines, it is not today actually dead. But it can at times seem to be more absent than present. Yet, if it did not exist, diplomacy would have to be invented.

In what follows, I shall speak as a former practitioner. My service was divided equally between bilateral activity (in Iran, Cambodia, France and Japan) and multilateral (in London and Brussels).

Let me admit, at the onset, that diplomats do have a bad name. In an interview with Hannah Costigan, in the ‘Shropshire Star’, last June, I was reported as advocating plain dealing:

“ You can’t be an effective diplomat without being clear and straightforward. You don’t have to say everything; but I have found that plain dealing is best. Deviousness always backfires”.

Yet, is not a diplomat an honest man sent abroad to lie for the good of his country (in the famous quip of the Elizabethan Provost of Eton and sometime overseas Envoy, Sir Henry Wootton)? Is the diplomat bound in public affairs by the same morality he will respect in private life? Didn’t the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Italian statesman, Count Cavour, once say: “If we did for ourselves what we do for our country, what rogues we should be”. When Karl von Clausewitz said that “war is the continuation of politics by other means”, was he not implying that diplomacy is the extension of war, by other means?

To be sure, the world has never been a cosy place, a Victorian Sunday School, the Queensberry Rules at work. Thomas Hobbes, in ‘Leviathan’, famously wrote of the life of man, when it lacked central government, as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. He also said the same of international society, as he then experienced it:

“Kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independence, are in continual jealousies and in the state and posture of Gladiators, having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another; that is their forts, garrisons and guns, upon the frontiers of their kingdoms; and continual spies upon their neighbours, which is a posture of war”.

Nevertheless, diplomacy is not, as so often assumed, a moral desert. At its best, it can be about charm, not coercion; good manners, not ill; persuasion, not deception. About building where possible on trust and on common interests, rather than on mendacity and aggrandisement. There is always, and understandably, the ever-resilient strand of national self-interest. But intertwined with it is often an idealistic second strand: the sense of justice; the belief that there is some over-arching standard beyond the narrow national interest, by which diplomacy can and should be judged. That instinct has a long history, rooted in religion and in notions of natural law.

In the case of the Ancient Greeks, despite their sometimes appalling behaviour in practice, there was also in theory the aspiration to common political and religious institutions, the assemblies of the Amphictyonic League and the Olympic Games. An ancient example often quoted is the rejection of Themistocles' advice, following the Persian retreat, that the Athenians should set fire to the fleets of their fellow Greek allies, then conveniently in harbour close at hand, and so ensure lasting Athenian ascendance. The suggestion was rejected as being, "exceedingly advantageous and exceedingly dishonourable". There are more modern instances: in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the suppression of the slave trade; after 1945, British decolonisation. They were both morally driven. British support for the enlargement of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe has also had a component of altruism. American foreign policy, too has rarely been free from some sort of moral coating.

A word here about individual freedom of conscience. The modern British diplomat is a civil servant – albeit of a superior kind, at least in his own estimation. If he has a sympathy for one British political party rather than another (as he is entitled to, in a free society), he keeps it to himself and loyally serves the elected Government of the day. He is also bound by the Official Secrets Act, and needs permission to publish. But he is not obliged to help carry through a major foreign policy with which he profoundly disagrees on moral grounds. He can advise against it. If overruled, he may request to be assigned to other duties. In an extreme scenario, he can resign; in which case the basic requirement is that he should do so discreetly. If he wants to kick up a fuss, he must go into politics. While still a member of the Diplomatic Service, and always in a situation of crisis, he must not betray the trust vested in him, or in effect blackmail the government of the day, by public disclosure of dissent or by the overnight withdrawal of expertise and manpower. Diplomacy, as conducted by professionals, has never been a "Kiss-and-Tell" calling.

I confess that I myself occasionally had doubts about certain British policies of the day, including one with which I was directly involved; but these were doubts as to the judgements made and the outcomes to be expected – in a word, doubts about credibility and effectiveness – not reservations of a primarily moral character. If anything, the boot was on the other foot.

It was the moral conscience of my *employers* about *me* that should have been activated.

Thus, I had been under the clear impression, on joining the Diplomatic Service, that I was signing up for a civilised career of elegance and ease, waltzing under the chandeliers with *décolté* Contessas, and consorting with Monarchs, Presidents, Prime Ministers and the like, in the Chancelleries of the Great Powers. In the event, there was indeed a little of that. But no one told me that I should also have stones thrown at me by religious fanatics in the Middle East, be menaced by street mobs in South-East Asia, or find myself chased by the French riot police through the narrower streets of the Second Arrondissement in Paris, during the “Events of ’68” (I was, I promise, only watching the kids set light to the Stock Exchange, honest- but I ran a mile in two minutes!) What’s more, no danger money was forthcoming from the F.O. And the swine even set me to work to learn economics, to master statistics, and to attend a French Business School. Clearly, I was the victim of a false prospectus. Most immoral, I reckon!

What stands out a mile, to readers of Ernest Satow, Harold Nicolson and the memoirs of an earlier age, is the extent and complexity of the change which diplomacy has undergone over the past fifty years. Embassies have proliferated in number, as newly independent countries have established their overseas representation. International and regional organisations have burgeoned. The work of an Embassy has extended from the political and consular to the cultural and commercial. New issues, such as protection of the environment, post-Cold War peacekeeping and concern with international terrorism, have been added to the diplomatic agenda. Improvements in communication and facility of contact have brought greatly increased ministerial travel and instant and constant consultation between Ministry and Embassy, home government and foreign government.

Multilateral diplomacy, in particular, has become a mega-phenomenon, demanding new knowledge and often novel techniques. This is, of course,

attributable to the development of the United Nations, and of other international bodies and groupings such as the WTO, the OECD, and the G8/G20. But it has also been carried forward by the emergence of the European Union (which not only has a raft of ministerial councils and important official committees in Brussels, but also supports a network of diplomatic missions of its own around the globe). And there are now regional structures elsewhere in the world, each with its internal co-ordinating mechanisms and external patterns of international contact.

Add to this, the fact that the professional diplomat's past quasi-monopoly of knowledge about previously arcane foreign places and peoples has been challenged by the expertise of mediemen, academics and the staffs of Chambers of Commerce and of Non-Governmental Organisations. Also, by today's army of political advisers and spin doctors. I shall revert to the latter, later in this lecture.

In consequence, diplomacy has become more challenging. Certainly, the diplomat must be an eclectic, a polymath, a co-ordinator and team-worker, adept at networking. He must be open to new concepts, eager to acquire new knowledge and adept at facing new players both in government and in the private sector.

The requirement is not only for men and women with a fairly high I.Q. Fluency in foreign languages is a "must" – often of a higher order, in international organisations, than that demanded in bilateral posts, in which quite a lot of one's time is spent within the national Embassy. (I thought I spoke French well, after four years in the British Embassy in Paris. But in the Brussels Commission, I had to use the language, not for three or four hours each day, but for twelve plus. After spells of leave in the UK, I always suffered "French face-ache" during the first few days back in the Berlaymont – my Anglo-Saxon cheek and chin muscles tended initially to go on strike).

Even physical stamina can be important. (At the launching of the Uruguay Round in Punta del Este as the EU trade negotiator, I naturally worked all through the final night until the following night; at a very difficult UNCTAD ministerial meeting in Belgrade, my EU negotiating team and I worked for three days and two nights with no more than a total of four hours sleep). Good health, strict short-term abstinence from rich food and alcohol where necessary, and always an iron will are the order of the day; without them, the strongest negotiating position and the most cogent argument can cease to be unassailable.

Looking to the future, I would expect diplomacy beyond 2010 to be marked *inter alia* by:

- IT, including the universal employment of videoconferencing and other forms of instant communication and data processing. (This should be seen as potentially an enhancement, not a hobbling, of the diplomat's scope for action in the field. He may be more closely over-seen from his capital, but he has greater opportunity to influence headquarters – just as more frequent ministerial travel means that the Ambassador gets more of a chance to nobble his master, the Politician, at close quarters);
- The necessary further blurring of the distinction between bureaucrats and diplomats or between “Home Civil Servants” and “Foreign Service Officers”. (In an interdependent world, in conditions of “globalisation”, water-tight governmental compartments make less and less sense; many domestic departments in Whitehall already have, of necessity, direct and intricate relations with their opposite numbers abroad, especially within the EU. This can pose problems of co-ordination; of the compatibility of the sectoral with the general. But it is a fact of life today);
- The evergrowing need to take into account new actors on the foreign policy scheme.

Let me expand on this last point. Up to and even beyond the Napoleonic Wars, very few Europeans concerned themselves directly with foreign affairs; it was the preserve of Princes and a small aristocratic body of Ministers, Envoys and Diplomats who probably had more in common with their foreign counterparts than with their own ill-informed and impassive co-nationals back home. The English public, as a rule, were notably indifferent. To be sure, young gentlemen of good family, accompanied by their Chaplains and Tutors, Dragomans and Domestics, embarked on the Grand Tour. The Duchess of Richmond even gave a Ball in Brussels (and was gravely inconvenienced by the unexpected clash with the subsequently arranged battle of Waterloo – but what else could one expect of that jumped up little Corsican, Mr Bonaparte?). Jane Austen's novels, and Parson Woodforde's diaries, record an English social scene which appears largely indifferent to the clash of continental armies and oblivious to the knavish tricks of foreigners.

Today, however, we live in a global political village as well as in a global economy. In the contemporary West, everyone has views on foreign policy; far from being a closed preserve, it has become, like our views on education and our notions of the shortcomings of the young, a public park where anyone is free to kick a ball about. In Europe and America, not only learned institutions (like the RIIA and the IISS, with us) but also party-political and private “think-tanks” abound, challenging and second-guessing the professionals in the Foreign Ministries.

The media too! I personally deplore the over-simplified world of the sound-bite, and the short attention span of the TV screen; the know-all assurance of the teenage scribblers on the broadsheets and the bar-stool arrogance of interviewers on the ‘Today’ programme. But these guys and dolls have their role to play – as, famously, did US television cameramen, press commentators and news agency reporters in Indo-China in the ‘Sixties, to my direct experience and awed admiration. The Vietnam War seemed to me – stationed, as I was, in the area – misconceived, ill-directed and above all unwinnable. This message was eventually relayed to the American people back home, too. So mediamen have their value.

But, if they are necessary, they are not sufficient. They offer only episodic, not continuous, coverage of people, places and events. They are also highly derivative and dependent on others. (I was once cynically amused, but also mildly outraged, by a senior American journalist who spent long hours being briefed by me in a foreign country with which he was unfamiliar, and from which US diplomatic representation had been temporarily withdrawn; only for him to offer the opinion, having returned home and published his articles to wide acclaim, that newsmen had made Embassies redundant).

I mentioned sound-bites and simplifications. It goes almost without saying that such trivial chirpiness and dumbing-down cuts no mustard, when applied to the sheer complexity of many world issues. The global waters are often opaque, even muddy. There is the old diplomatic joke: to every many-sided and entangled international issue, there is always one answer which is simple, lucid and logical – but which is invariably wrong.

Which brings me to the dreaded sofa counsellors, the political advisors and appointees and spin-doctors. A fairly recent phenomenon, in London, they have long been a feature of Washington. That is not necessarily a recommendation; such folk – who are not chosen on merit – can have real limitations. Not least, their liability – the supreme fallacy in foreign

policy – to see the world as they want it to be, or as they fondly assume it must be, rather than as it really is. Also their reluctance to tell truth to power – unlike the professionals of yesteryear.

Let me now move from the general to the particular; and look at the UK as such; and, quite closely, at our own Foreign Office.

As to the UK, it grieves me to say it, but there seems little doubt that our country continues in its long drawn out international decline – and, some would add, is also entering a period of domestic decay and now stands in urgent need of reform. There is a spate of current books on the subject – Philippe Legrain’s “After Shock”; Tony Judt’s “Ill Fares the Land” and (more significantly, because he is a ‘Cameroon’) Philip Blond’s “Red Tory”. My shelves are full of such literature, from the past decade.

It particularly grieves me that our *politics* has seemingly changed so irreversibly.

Membership of the House of Commons has become, for many, a professional career – what the Economist has described as “a game now played by slick graduates, who work in think tanks or back rooms before climbing the pole to their own (parliamentary) seat”. Andrew Turnbull, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service 2002-2005, in testimony to a House of Lord’s Committee in August 2009, stated his belief that many MPs had entered parliament too young and that their leaders were not always “people of seniority or wisdom”. In our new Parliament, my impression is that some – on both sides of the House – have indeed achieved little or nothing in the real world, outside public relations. (Our Ludlow MP, Philip Dunne, I hasten to add, is an honourable exception!)

The Presidential-type patronage of the British PM, these days, is simply massive, on almost an 18<sup>th</sup> Century scale. In the last Parliament, the PM had the gift of over 90 odd junior ministerial posts, outside the actual Cabinet; and almost 80 well paid ‘Special Adviserships’ to bestow on Apparatchiks (twenty of them in No. 10). Things have got only a little better, under the LibCons – 70 junior ministers and 66 special advisers, (eighteen of them in No. 10, including Mr Andy Coulson of News of the World fame – read Peter Burden’s “Fake Sheikhs and Royal Trappings”).

Perhaps I can give practical illustration of this by quoting from the blog, earlier this month, of a newly appointed LDP special adviser (Duncan Brack – for all I know a perfectly decent chap, working for a much respected Minister):

“What do we do? After only a week in the job, I am not entirely sure I know yet, but the essential point of special advisers is to help their ministers drive their programme through. Civil servants must be politically neutral; inevitably they may not always appreciate the political importance of particular issues..... and sometimes find it difficult to adjust rapidly to a radical change of direction and ministers can need support in arguing with them”.

Possibly true, for a domestic department (although I would question the implication that Civil Servants are slow to respond to the desiderata of Ministers – the former are usually quick off the mark and do their homework in advance of general elections – the ‘Yes Minister’ TV soaps are wide of the mark!) But what about the realities which prevail *overseas*? Could a new minister expect to impose ‘a radical change of direction’ on North Korea or Somalia or Iran? What might the ‘special adviser’ do, that the professional diplomat could not, to put the new Minister in the picture?

The fact is that the old Whitehall ethos, the tradition of the Northcote/Trevelyan reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the duty of “Telling Truth to Power”, are all in retreat and may never quite come back. Successive Cabinet Secretaries and Heads of the Civil Service over the past 30 years (Lords Armstrong, Butler, Wilson, Turnbull) have done their best, but proved powerless to prevent it.

Yet alarming difficulties and dangers do lie ahead of us, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is no time to be complacent. Nor to economise on our diplomacy. There is everything to play for: but we are going to need every ounce of professional insight and expertise to get by. The challenge is not for amateurs, let alone ‘shamateurs’.

William Hague said, in a well argued presentation to the International Institute of Strategic Studies in July 2009:

“Any informed assessment of likely trends in world affairs, over the next decade, on which our whole national future heavily depends, is a sobering one ..... the pattern of events we might expect leads unmistakably and uncomfortably to a world environment in which it will be more difficult for this country and its traditional allies to achieve their foreign policy goals, unless we improve the way we go about them”.

Hague pointed to “powerful forces of economics and demography elsewhere in the world;” and gave reasons why the world looked likely to

be a more dangerous place in the coming decades. (Among his reasons were ‘failed states’, terrorism, risk of irreversible climate change, shortages of water, and the global spread of military nuclear technology. He might have included in his list the ongoing exponential increase in world population; half again more of us are predicted, by 2050). To which now have to be added, in the light of this year’s Reith Lectures by Lord Rees of Ludlow, the President of the Royal Society, the future potential dangers of ‘Bio-Error’ and ‘Bio-Terror’).

William Hague correctly noted the declining relative power of many Western nations, in the face of the huge expansion of economies such as China’s and India’s and even Brazil’s (the so-called “Big Emerging Economies” or B.E.E.s) – Europe’s share of the world economy being projected to decline from 18% to 10% by 2050. [Not entirely surprising, since China today exports every 6 hours what she did in the whole of 1978 – Phillippe Legrain, “After Shock”].

Indeed, the EU as a whole is passing through something of a crisis. To quote the latest official ‘Reflection Group’ on its future, the EU “stands at a critical point in its history”..... We now face a choice ..... follow a path to sustainable economic recovery and a more influential role on the world stage, or prepare for a managed decline into irrelevance”. (Project Europe 2030, Challenge and Opportunities, May 2010).

One RIIA commentator this month (Richard Youngs) went further, and put it this way:

“It has been well known for some time that Europe’s relative decline is the major challenge for future European Union foreign policy ..... But in the last six months this incremental decline seems to have accelerated alarmingly. The EU’s international power appears to be in freefall”.

A provocative piece this month, from the pen of a French Philosopher (Pascal Bruckner, in the RSA Journal), begins even as follows:

“The European idea is dying of its own contradictions, battered from the west by American dynamism and from the east by the emergence of India and China, which are gradually relegating our continent to the role of a minor economic and political player. The resurgence of nationalistic sentiment, the Greek crisis and the collapse of the euro are good examples of these tensions. Suffering from divisions, the absence of a common government and mass unemployment, the noble European project built on the ruins of the

Second World War is sinking”.

I do not myself accept this last judgement. It is alarmist and downright quirky. Europe has been in difficulties in the past; I expect her to overcome them, given time, effort and a little good luck. It can be argued that the European Union has a habit of turning a crisis into an opportunity. “There is reason to believe that the current crisis of governance in the eurozone will follow this pattern, if only because the alternative is really dreadful” (Peter Sutherland). But we clearly all have cause to be extremely worried. Britain may not be in the Euro, but we are part and parcel of the EU, for compelling reasons of national self-interest. British political leaders must continue to engage with it – and say why, to the electorate.

And, of course, even the US has its problems. As the FT reminds us:  
“We have gone from a world in which the US thought it had limitless resources and unbounded options to one where the limits are clear; from a world in which you could work in the G8 to one where you have to work in the context of the G20; a world where new technologies and new powers play a bigger role”.

But if that is true of America, how much the more is it true of Britain?

The UK is far from broken; but parts of it are less functional than they used to be. The glory days of The City of London may now lie behind us. We have largely de-industrialised. We are under-skilled and only patchily educated. We are divided by tribalisms and ethnic tensions. We have possibly the worst public finances of any advanced country. True, as the FCO website boasts: “We are an influential member of key international organisations such as the United Nations, the European Union, NATO and the Commonwealth, and we have strong links with many parts of the world”. But let’s not kid ourselves. We are no longer a truly world power – notwithstanding our useful and much to be exploited place at the traditional “top tables”. We should no longer aspire to be a world policeman – we are nearly bust and can no longer afford such pretensions, other than on an equal, if modest, footing *pari passu* with other European partners.

And it will come as no surprise to this audience that the so-called ‘Special Relationship’ with the US, while still solidly grounded, is no longer entirely what it was. As Lord Hurd has expressed it: “In the penny-farthing relationship which we now have with the United States, the farthing is gradually getting smaller”. In my view, the US is probably

already beginning to recalibrate the relationship and seek new partners, in a changing world. Accordingly, we should not expect too much from it (cf the Falklands and BP). Equally, we do need also to be careful not to be ‘satellised’ by it, as Tony Blair was. As a recent Tory policy document (“A Resilient Nation” – largely written by my ex-colleague Baroness Neville-Jones) puts it, we have a duty to offer “candid advice, as well as reliable support”. After all, as I have myself put it elsewhere (in “Before the Killing Fields”), a Labour Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair, did, after all, rubber-stamp a prospectus on Iraq that a previous Labour Prime Minister, Mr Harold Wilson, would have examined and rejected.

Let me turn, therefore, to the nuts and bolts of specifically British diplomacy. After successes in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, Britain over-reached herself in Iraq and sleep-walked into a serious war in Afghanistan. Were our diplomats to blame? Probably not, because they were not fully brought into the act early enough. Indeed the over assertive-nature of prime ministerial government, tentatively under Margaret Thatcher and then much more markedly Tony Blair, ended up reducing even the Cabinet to a cipher, with the House of Commons nowhere to be seen.

Pretty well everyone now concedes that the romantic amateurism and sofa-style decision making of Labour’s Downing Street has been destructive of British influence in the world and at times downright dangerous. As Chris Patten put it (in “Cousins and Strangers”, 2006):

“One of the government departments most affected by the accumulation of power in Downing Street has been the Foreign Office . . . . . It cannot have been helpful in the buildup to the Iraq war and in its aftermath that the Prime Minister was divorced from the informed scepticism that the Foreign Office would have brought to a discussion of the available policy options”.

Certainly, the allied ‘exit strategy’, after the successful military shock victory over Saddam Hussein, was a disaster from start to finish. I look forward to reading, one day, Sir Jeremy Greenstock’s account (‘spiked’, at present) of his travails working with the invincibly ignorant, arbitrary and dictatorial US Viceroy in Iraq, Paul Bremer III. Not surprisingly, our former Permanent Representative to the UN was refused permission to publish, by the last government.

But Lord Hurd has been free to speak out. He wrote in 2007 (‘British Diplomacy’) that:

“The post-war plan was based on assumptions in the Pentagon

which quickly proved false. They ignored their own ignorance and trusted advisers who others knew were untrustworthy. The British Government subordinated its thinking so completely to the United States that no serious questions were asked about the plan and no attempt made to modify it in the light of British experience in Iraq or the Middle East. No attention was paid to those who predicted correctly that while most Iraqis would rejoice at Saddam Hussein's overthrow, it did not follow that they would welcome foreign military occupation. The recklessness of these assumptions in the Pentagon passes belief. So does the failure of Britain to question them".

Lord David Owen had written much the same in 2006, in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, in an article about Hubris and Nemesis in Heads of Government:

"Blair, after winning a second General Election two months prior to 9/11, in the flush of victory, with no parliamentary scrutiny, formally changed the whole basis of Cabinet government as it had related to foreign and defence matters. The new structure was deliberately designed by Blair to ensure he could exercise, over international policy, much the same powers as President Bush in the White House. The key officials and their staff on foreign and defence policy and the European Union were brought into the political hothouse atmosphere inside 10 Downing Street in two new Secretariats to service the Prime Minister politically and strategically, rather than the Cabinet. Much the same was done with the Joint Intelligence Committee, in terms of its working arrangements if not in terms of its formal structure. The consequence was a lack of objectivity, probity and collectivity over the handling of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq ..... Competently handled, the US/UK invasion of Iraq could have laid the foundation for a unified democratic Iraq. Incompetently handled, it has led to a civil war".

My former colleague, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, once Chairman of the JIC and Ambassador in Moscow, went further, in the press:

"Mr Blair's prime responsibility is to defend the interests of his country. This he has signally failed to do. Stiff in opinions, but often in the wrong, he has manipulated public opinion, sent our soldiers into distant lands for ill-conceived purposes, misused the intelligence agencies to serve his ends and reduced the Foreign Office to a demoralised cipher because it keeps reminding him of inconvenient facts ....Mr Blair has done more to damage British

interests in the Middle East than Anthony Eden, who led the UK to disaster in Suez”.

So much for Iraq. What about Afghanistan, I hear you cry? Maybe this, too, needs to be revisited by the professional experts. It is not exactly a Central Asian country yearning to become a “P.C.” Scandinavian democracy, anxiously waiting to be saved by Western military “surge” tactics. I recommend the paper written by Adam Holloway MP, last October: “In Blood Stepped in Too Far? Towards a Realistic Policy for Afghanistan”. (Holloway was an international reporter for ITV, and later a professional soldier, before he entered Parliament. He knows the country well and visits it frequently). In my own view, the present Western policy is too ‘local reality lite’, and too ‘crusader heavy’. It may be too late, now, to get it right, without taking years to do so.

Back to the FCO. Ours has always been, and still remains, one of the world’s most respected diplomatic services. It continues to count, at and near the top, some remarkable men and women – balanced, well-informed and also tough-minded.

But, across the board, recently, morale has been low.

Thus, one ex-High Commissioner writes that “things aren’t what they were. There has been a significant decline in available resources – due to personnel cuts as well as financial stringency. At the same time, activity in ‘services’ such as consular and immigration work has increased enormously, as have the burdens of accountability and Freedom of Information. This has taken its toll on political analysis and expertise. And morale seems to be pretty poor”. Another senior ex-ambassador goes further, also in a private letter, in saying that “The Office is a dejected, marginalized and run-down establishment today, while our dwindling embassies are taken up with admin”.

British Ambassadors, these days, are no longer to write the traditional ‘Valedictory Despatch’, giving their overall policy reflections on final retirement, (as famously Sir Nicholas Henderson did from Paris in 1979, with major impact); or after serving in a post that they had come to know well. The recent Labour Government could not bear anything remotely approaching criticism. Neither Blair nor Brown welcomed civil servants who spoke truth to power; they preferred to make policy in more restricted circles, sometimes with individuals not chosen on merit, nor required to have served any serious apprenticeship. Blair’s entourage once even attempted to exclude the British Ambassador in Washington

from a Prime Ministerial call on the President in the White House, to make room for a spin doctor. More recently, our Ambassador in Libya was excluded from an audience with President Qaddafi.

Let me flag up one or two points of detail. They relate to intelligence co-ordination; overseas development programmes; bogus 'managerialism'; and possible future measures of economy.

On intelligence matters, the mess the JIC got into, in the run up to the Iraq war, under (quite without precedent) an SIS chairman, is well known. Perhaps, I should explain to a West Midlands audience that the consistent best practice, endorsed by Lords Franks and Butler, is that the Chair of the JIC should come from a department other than one of the Intelligence Agencies. This tradition was broken by Tony Blair who, in this as so many other things, felt free to break well-established conventions, with disastrous results. In his lecture at Brunel University in July 2007, another ex-colleague, Sir Nicholas Barrington (who knows the Middle East and Central Asia well) argued that: "The Butler enquiry let the government off too lightly". He added that; "I believe that both Scarlett [JIC Chairman] and Dearlove [Head of the SIS] should have resigned or been sacked". I myself think that the Chairmanship of the JIC should at the next opportunity revert to an experienced and very senior member of the Diplomatic Service designated by the Foreign Secretary. We shall see what our new government does about this.

On overseas development assistance, John Major and Douglas Hurd, in a joint article in *The Times* last June, declared, inter alia, their belief that; "Britain's aid programme has become dangerously divorced from British foreign policy". My own impression is that DfID has indeed strayed off course, under Labour. It has had generous financial resources; but has been short on delivery (not least, currently, in Afghanistan); and has tended to adopt an over-theoretical (or over-ideological) approach to its responsibilities. Certainly, the new LibCon Coalition should require the injection of a greater foreign policy input into DfID decisions. As my former colleague, Charles Powell, wrote in the *Telegraph* last month: "the Department for International Development can no longer behave as a taxpayer-funded international NGO, rather than as part of the government. Its programmes must be deployed much more in line with our national interests and priorities".

Next, bogus 'managerialism', I alluded to this, in my recent autobiography ('*Kindly Call Me God*'), with reference to "a business administrative paradigm associated with the name of the late Sir Peter

Kemp”, the then equivalent of Whitehall’s (ex-BP business genius) Lord Browne, today. Management Consultants (Andrew Mackinlay) were let loose, to implement the new strategy of ‘delivery’. I hear justified complaints against this on all sides, as a waste of time and inappropriate to realities at overseas diplomatic posts, whatever it may mean elsewhere in Whitehall. Sir Christopher Meyer, in his latest book, “Getting Our Way”, writes that the “culture of targets, set by the Treasury”, had led to a “bureaucratic exercise of elephantine proportions” in the FO – to the point of requiring him, while Ambassador in Washington, to set the number of public speeches he was planning to deliver in each upcoming year. Heads of Diplomatic Mission have been obliged to become ‘bean counters’ and small-time clerks, instead of devoting themselves to their main task of getting to know the country in which they serve, the mind-set of the foreign government to which they are accredited and how to influence it. One Ambassador at a small post in Asia is said to have commented, wryly, that to overshoot his Missions’ annual budget for any reason would be taken more seriously than if he had declared war without authorisation. (Imagine a Brigadier in Afghanistan one October telling his men that they should economise on bullets and bully-beef for budgetary reasons until the following January).

Certainly, the strategic objectives of the FCO have had to be negotiated with the Treasury through the medium of “Public Service Agreements”. In my view, Foreign Policy is not in detail the business of the Treasury. And it is I think, self-evident that well-conducted diplomacy cannot properly be measured by business consultants. No one, in my days of study, either at Civil Service College or at Business School, would ever have claimed the contrary! Time, therefore, to blow the whistle in the Diplomatic Service?

Even Personnel Policy at the FCO may need to be revised under the same Rubric. The Diplomatic Service must move with the times, and reflect the society from which it is recruited. Religious, ethnic and gender “Inclusiveness” is fine, and “Equal Opportunities”; even sexual non-discrimination. But one ex-colleague has drawn my attention to a recent official bulletin proclaiming the news that “The FCO is emerging as one of the UK’s top employers for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual staff”. Another colleague points to the existence even of an “Anti-Bullying Human Resources Unit”. In my day, it went without saying that all staff, high and low, were expected to be – and actually were – polite and helpful to each other. Nor was there a particular problem over sexuality, considered a private matter unless it caused scandal abroad or exposed an officer to blackmail by the KGB. So, how ‘PC’ does the FO have to get? Not, I

would hope, at the expense of the efficient central direction and deployment of D.S. staff. I have heard stories of Ambassadors having to interview, by long distance telephone, a range of applicants competing for junior positions. (In the old days, people – indeed, all of us, from top to bottom – were simply picked and posted, without argument and without time-consuming procedures). All in all, there surely comes a point where the entitlements of the individual need to be placed in the wider context of the public service and the national interest.

I come to the question of cuts: close to impossible in a Service currently so over-stretched and under-funded. The British Government have been spending billions on defence and overseas development assistance, while the Foreign Office has been left strapped for cash. In my view, defence and – most of all – DfID (which has four or five times the total budget of the DS) should now bear the burden and the grief of cutbacks, in the current admittedly major economic and financial crisis. The Diplomatic Service has already undergone severe pruning over the past few years, as well as an increase in its responsibilities. (To the point of having already had, several years ago, to cut back 25% of the resources devoted to European posts and issues, to meet needs in South and East Asia).

If more diplomatic cuts are now totally unavoidable, the greatest single saving could be made in the bloated Foreign Affairs and Defence bureaucracy at Number Ten and in the Cabinet Office. If the new “National Security Council as a Committee of the Cabinet” achieves its purpose, and does not constitute a new bureaucracy, so much the better; although, as Sir Christopher Meyer also argues, anything on the lines of the White House National Security Council should be avoided as unfit for purpose.

Beyond that, small economies might be made, through a further limited and carefully judged reduction in the number of diplomatic posts which HMG maintain overseas. For example, we already have no diplomatic representation in a number of small African states. It has never been essential to have an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in every capital nor a Consul General in every port. One could get by through the accreditation of more non-resident ambassadors (where necessary, backed up by some form of “Honorary Consul” on the spot). Within the EU, it should be possible for Member States to arrange cover for each other in areas remote from the national interest of the one or the other; or work through the local EC ‘Delegation’, where there was one. The new EU External Action Services should help. Consular work, too, should be scaled back. It has increased hugely, over the past ten years or

so – often under immediate and harsh media scrutiny. I think this deserves challenging. Coming to the assistance of genuinely distressed British citizens in dodgy places is one thing; expanding the British ‘nanny state’ to Calais and the Costa Brava is another.

This lecture is now more or less concluded. I should like to finish, however, on a note of self-criticism. Diplomats are necessary, but not sufficient, to keep the world turning. They must not get too uppity or élitist. Like all Civil Servants, they should be on tap not on top. The final shots have to be called by democratically elected and accountable politicians.

Furthermore, like politicians, diplomats can occasionally be prone to narcissism. In 1956, I reported for duty at the British Foreign Office, from University. Having scraped what was (in my view, if no one else’s) quite a good First in Part Two of the Historical Tripos, and somehow come nearly top of the list in the competitive entry examination, I was naively expecting to be received by the Foreign Secretary himself, with his thanks that I had agreed to adorn H.M. Foreign Service; perhaps even flown up to Balmoral, to kiss hands. Instead, I was directed to a personnel clerk in a seedy office in Carlton House Terrace. After a brief chat, the man had my measure. As I was leaving, he said that what had always struck him was that, however, exacting and rigorous the selection process for the post-war British Foreign Service had been made, nevertheless the percentage of idiots in each intake had tended to remain constant!

So I recommend, to all diplomats, a prudent measure of modesty. But I hope I have made it plain that – as I said at the outset – if they did not exist, diplomats would have to be invented. The world will always need them. Diplomacy will never die. And what is the point of keeping a world class Foreign Ministry chained up in King Charles Street, if 10 Downing Street does not want it to bark occasionally?

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